

Strategies to Overcome Diversity Challenges between Urban/Rural Students in Universities

Hisham A. Maddah (Corresponding author)

King Abdulaziz University,
Rabigh, 25732, Saudi Arabia.
hmaddah@kau.edu.sa

Abstract

The urban-rural imbalance between university students raises diversity challenges in many educational institutions. University leaders favor urban students' admission because of the misconception that rural students have lower academic performance than their urban counterparts. Here, strategies to overcome diversity challenges between urban and rural students in universities have been proposed. A diversification workshop project was suggested to be delivered for the current and/or incoming students at KAU in Rabigh to improve students attitudes towards their peers (student-to-student) and faculty-to-student interactions. Project learning outcomes for an inclusive urban/rural campus were discussed to overcome differences between students and achieve campus inclusion. Reform actions highlight that students should understand others, be respectful, accept differences and avoid stereotyping and undermining others' abilities. Two successful urban/rural models were introduced to address diversity-related problems. Leadership roles of all university parties have been explained with the suggested procedures and their frequencies according to university standards, regulation, potential budget, and funding for the proposed project to attain KAU campus homogeneity. Gender bias, racial bias, and unconscious bias are some of the difficulties that need to be recognized by university leaders. Several media/article resources were introduced to increase students/faculty awareness about rural/urban diversity.

Keywords: urban/rural imbalance; diversity; higher education; rural students; urban students

1. Introduction

The issue of [urban vs. rural] students in higher education institutions raises many educational questions towards having possible challenges, advantages, differences and/or similarities between students as well as faculty members in such a university. Current and/or incoming university students who reside in totally different environments (urban vs. rural) may have some misconceptions about the other party as well as the involved faculty staff as the following: (1) urban students are more educated and skilled; (2) rural students are slow, isolated, with limited resources; (3) urban students are confident, skilled, social, easy learners. Thus, both student parties and faculty members teaching in campus have to avoid stereotyping [1], [2].

The phrase “Urban” may refer to several perceived meanings such that pollution, public transportation, free events, culture, busy, and dirty; while the “Rural” phrase apparently denotes to various thoughts/words like cornfields, slow, isolated, grass, quiet, safe, no public transportation, and limited resources. In terms of resources, “Urban Resources” are abundant which allow students to do/find anything on and off campus with less campus engagement because of the available external community options and community connections; whereas “Rural Resources” are limited resulting in a friendlier environment between students, as compared to urbanized campuses, with hands-on engagement, captured audience, intimacy of campus resources/connections, less ethnic pockets (not much engagement outside of comfort zone), and campus focus. Typically, urban students are more educated and skilled than rural students (this might change from university to another since stereotyping is not always true); hence, rural students are viewed as slow, isolated and with limited resources in comparison to urban students who are viewed as confident, skilled, social and easy learners. Nevertheless, both student groups/faculty have to avoid stereotyping and respect others’ differences with no undermining of one’s skills and/or abilities [1], [2].

Despite the major expansion in the number of students in higher education institutions, admitted students from rural areas are still underrepresented at selective universities. The urban-rural imbalance of students’ entry to selective universities has been studied carefully to reduce this imbalance and attain more diverse campuses. Educational institutions in many countries around the world have implemented admission policies favoring rural students thereby altering the necessary urban-rural balance. However, some other universities have acquired the notion of favoring urban students because previous studies showed that rural students have lower academic performance than their urban peers; hence, they will certainly reduce the academic excellence of selective universities. In short, universities/students believe that rural students (1) have lower academic performance than their urban peers; (2) will reduce the academic excellence of selective universities [3].

The primary purpose of King Abdulaziz University (KAU) is to educate students to develop their knowledge, wisdom and values and to improve their problem solving, leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills; and personal health and well-being through discovery, innovation, participation, diversification, understanding, learning, critical examination, professional practice/training and behavioral and educational guidance. The university seeks to engage faculty, staff and students in better learning environment and diverse campus community that will ensure workforce/students collaboration, free exchange of ideas, creativity, equality, innovation and entrepreneurship with an understanding and appreciation for the complex cultural and physical worlds in which faculty, staff and students live; which reflects a safe environment that is free from discrimination [4], [5].

The university aims to support and encourage its faculty/students regionally, nationally, and globally by engaging them with external and international partners to ensure individuals can achieve their full potential for the survival of this and future generations and improve the quality of life for all; and for the ultimate goal of becoming a world-class university [4], [6].

This study aims to propose strategies to overcome diversity challenges between urban and rural students in universities. A diversification workshop project is suggested to be delivered for the current and/or incoming university students, at KAU in Rabigh City located in a rural area nearby small towns/villages, as an attempt

to improve the attitudes and interactions of student-to-student and faculty-to-student who come from different regions; hence, allowing urban/rural students and faculty staff to overcome differences between them for having a better campus inclusion and homogeneity.

2. Project Learning Outcomes

As mentioned previously, the proposed diversification workshop and/or project aims to improve the attitudes and interactions between both student-to-student and faculty-to-student parties. Urban and rural students have to respect each other’s differences (student-to-student): (1) there should be no undermined groups within the diverse campus community; (2) students have to accept others by changing their attitudes towards diversity; (3) students should get engaged in campus activities to accept others differences and promote community inclusion. Conversely, faculty-to-student should involve faculty staff in the diversification process through: (1) understand differences from one student to another and there are levels of learning abilities; (2) communicate with all students effectively and respect every idea given to you either from rural and/or urban students; (3) engage students in-class activities and organized events to initiate the culture change and develop student’s learning experience and diversity as an attempt to have the campus norm of being respectful and accepting to others [7]–[9]. Summarized learning outcomes of the proposed workshop for the inclusive urban and rural campus is shown in Table 1; KAU University modified and suggested vision/mission and goals for achieving a diversified campus are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Summary of the project learning outcomes for an inclusive urban and rural campus

Student-to-student	Faculty-to-student
1) Respect others’ differences.	1) Understand differences in learning abilities.
2) Avoid undermining skills and abilities of rural.	2) Communicate effectively with students.
3) Accept others by changing attitudes (positive).	3) Respect differences in students’ ideas.
4) Engage in campus activities.	4) Engage students in-class activities (events).

Table 2. KAU University vision/mission and goals for achieving a diversified campus [4], [6]

Vision	Becoming a world-class university with sustainability, community engagement, and campus diversification.
Mission	“Educate, Communicate, Participate – and Diversify the Community for a Better Learning Experience”
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Educate students to develop their knowledge, wisdom, and values. ▪ Engage faculty, staff, and students in better learning and diverse environment. ▪ Support and encourage its faculty/students regionally, nationally, and globally.

3. Reform Actions for Inclusion

Currently, the urban-rural situation at KAU (Rabigh) involve that urban students/faculty (1) undermine skills and learning abilities of rural students; (2) isolate and/or eliminate rural students from certain

activities; (3) neglect proposed ideas and thoughts of given by rural students.

Reform actions should be taken to overcome the urban-rural differences as the following: current and incoming students should (1) understand and define diversity in a university educational level; (2) respect, appreciate and understand the differences between urban and rural communities and traditions as well as differences in culture, race, and ethnicity between people on campus; (3) avoid stereotyping and undermining others including rural students/faculty; while faculty members and university administrators have to (1) develop students' skills to engage with others; (2) build a more inclusive and cohesive community; (3) apply university laws regarding disrespectful behaviors; (4) work together to establish a new and modified curriculum that would meet the needs of the diverse parties; (5) identify and resolve current diversity issues (urban/rural students) [7], [10].

Rural/urban students must also be educated in the proposed workshop to clearly define and get familiarize themselves with the following terms: race, racism, multicultural curriculum reform, and discrimination. Also, students have to develop their skills to interact, engage and include themselves with others to have positive relations between different ethnic and racial groups. Building a more inclusive and cohesive community within the university campus by incorporating faculty, staff, and students in solving different racism issues is important to overcome any racial and/or discrimination behaviors. Government regulations and university laws regarding cultural diversity and racism must be addressed and implemented strictly towards any observed misbehaviors; identifying and resolving current racism issues within the campus and responding to them according to the given instructions are vital for achieving inclusion and diversification. University administrators and faculty members should work side-by-side to establish a new/modified curriculum and assessment tools for a better learning environment that is free from discrimination. University leaders and administrators have to explicitly set rules and guidelines for mitigating racial activities and behaviors. Moreover, cooperation between faculty members and students in supporting and developing a more diverse community can facilitate the ultimate goal of blending the differences between rural/urban cultures and notions [7], [10].

4. Successful Models

A previous model in Taiwan introduced a university policy that favors rural students for admission to collect their academic records and compare their academic performance with their counterpart urban students. The comparison was done for either one complete college year and/or the accumulated college years. According to the unexpected results, it was shown that rural students have consistently outperformed urban students in their semester-based GPA points as well as a class rank percentile. Differences in academic performance arose from the excellent performance of rural students during their freshman year [3]. The "University in Taiwan" admission policy model in favoring rural students for admission would be a successful approach to keep the university among the high ranked institutions without depending on urban students owing to the consistently outstanding performance of rural students (in the freshman year).

Another model was introduced by Western Carolina University to involve rural-urban exchange activities in classrooms and educate both parties about diversity through trained teachers. The university administrators suggested preparing teachers and educators to be capable of meeting diversity-related

challenges that might arise between rural/urban students. The role of teachers/professors in classrooms was found to be very critical to address diversity-related problems through having a multicultural education and promoting equity. Educators must design and/or update curricula and experiences that would meet the diverse needs of their students. Teaching through engagement have to be considered to allow Urban students to interact with their peers like rural students from diverse ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and language groups for a developed campus inclusion. University leaders at "Western Carolina University" were able to reduce tensions between rural/urban students by educating their faculty staff on "How to promote diversity between students?". In short, faculty were prepared in the "rural-urban exchange" program to meet diversity-related challenges in educating all students through (1) promoting equity; (2) designing and/or updating curricula and experiences; (3) Engaging students in field experiences in both rural and urban areas; (4) involving students in diverse regional and socioeconomic groups [11].

5. Leadership Role and Anticipated Results

The leadership role of both faculty and administrators have to be carefully addressed to achieve the anticipated results in diversifying university campus. Faculty should (1) communicate effectively and understand university policies, other's opinions and ideas; (2) ask for more information and clarification to avoid misunderstanding others; (3) treat every student equally regardless of his/her gender, race, ethnicity, culture; (4) remember that they are accountable for their own actions and words; (5) develop diversity through in-class activities and organized events. Administrators should (1) help educators to develop a multicultural curriculum; (2) engage themselves with others and join diverse teams with individuals of various culture; (3) arrange relationship-building exercises and workshops for classrooms diversification since having arranged events and gatherings and celebrating differences lead to improved harmony; (4) be aware and sensitive to certain groups and respect different religions and religious groups as well as their ritual and beliefs that may pose various challenges that may need extra consideration; (5) share knowledge and learn others culture by explaining what it is like being in a certain age group, a different cultural or social background, listen to other's ideas carefully and respectfully and ask for more knowledge about other's culture; (6) understand every student abilities and skills [12].

Applying previous actions and recommendations from both faculty/administrators sides would allow rural/urban students to respect, accept, and engage with others and not to undermine other's ideas skills, and abilities towards classes tasks and university requirements. Anticipated results of campus diversification would certainly highlight the values of being respectful, tolerance, and compassion to other's ideas opinions, beliefs without having disrespectful arguments between student-to-student and student-to-faculty of rural/urban parties [12]. Table 3 shows the suggested procedures and their frequencies towards applying the proposed project/workshop on rural/urban students' inclusion.

Table 3. Suggested procedures and their frequencies towards the application of rural/urban students' diversification program in KAU University for achieving a diversified campus

#	Procedure	Frequency per year*	Delivered by**	Targeted Group**
1	Courses/workshops, presentations/invited speakers	6	A + F	S
2	Communication panels	12	A + F	S
3	Students engagement events	6	A + F	S
4	Guidelines and policy development	2	A	S + F
5	Campus awareness programs	6	A	S + F
6	Curriculum and multicultural reform	1	A	S + F

*Timeframe of the project is taken for the year of 2019; (one-year only); **A: Administrators, F: Faculty, S: Students

6. Meeting Standards and Regulations

University standards and regulations have to be considered when it comes to applying any proposed project and/or workshop on current and incoming students and faculty staff. A basic rule is that the priority of admission goes to Saudi nationality (Saudi students > 90%) since they are motivated by the government to continue their university education. Further, rural/urban students should (1) have equal opportunities; (2) meet minimum university requirements and evaluation standards; (3) be disciplined for misbehavior. Campus inclusion and student engagement must (1) follow country's culture/religions standards; (2) segregate men/women (two campuses, buildings and/or rooms) to meet cultural needs; (3) only have heterosexuality in sexual diversity [4].

7. Potential Budget and Funding

The potential budget for the proposed project at KAU for the year (2019) [7] and identification of where this funding would come from are shown in Table 4. The author believes that diversification will allow KAU to overcome rural/urban issues, support educational projects, scholarly research, creative activities and other programmatic initiatives that promote multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion, affirmative action and nondiscrimination for the benefit of the University community.

Table 4. Potential budget and funding sources at KAU University for achieving a diversified campus

#	Potential Budget* (Year: 2019)	SAR
1	Courses/workshops, presentations/invited speakers	1.00 M
2	Guidelines and policy development	0.20 M
3	Curriculum and multicultural reform	0.20 M
4	Campus awareness programs	0.30 M
5	Students engagement events	0.20 M
6	Communication panels	0.10 M
#	Funding Sources (Year: 2019)	
1	A grant from King Abdulaziz University	60%
2	The Office of Recruitment and Diversity	20%
3	The Deanship of Students' Affairs	20%

*Potential budget: (proposed total requirement funds is around SAR 2.00 Million [M] for the 2019 year)

8. Difficulties and Suggestions

Challenges that face educators to create a diverse and inclusive campus are associated with something called “unconscious bias” in which studies show that even those who value equality may unconsciously behave in discriminatory ways. An unconscious bias refers to a prejudice we are unaware of holding; previous studies found that every person brings a lifetime of experience and cultural history into his/her interactions with others. Examples include the following: (1) Gender bias: it is perceived that women are less likely to be seen as capable of leadership; (2) Racial bias: faculty of color feels undermined and they have been hired for affirmative action purposes; (3) Sexual orientation bias: students believe that their peers hold negative attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals. Unconscious bias has a negative impact on both students and faculty; retention and academic development are the most common issues that affect all students while lower job satisfaction, tense relationships with colleagues and an unequal division of duties are some of the real problems for faculty [13].

Accordingly, unconscious bias: (1) involves gender, racial, sexual, regional and class bias; (2) a prejudice we are unaware of holding; (3) brings students’ experience and history into interactions with others. Relating unconscious bias to rural/urban differences assures that there might be a class/region bias towards rural students where they are perceived to be less educated/skilled. These differences could also arise from Lifestyle, clothes, habits, and interests between rural and urban students. The author suggests that there should be (1) engagement of students to overcome bias (events); (2) Acceptance of others by learning their culture and positive communication.

9. Recommended Resources

Several media/article resources to increase students and faculty awareness towards rural/urban diversity in higher education institution include:

(1) Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities | First and Second Grade Social Studies Lesson [14]:

Learn about urban, suburban and rural communities in this social studies lesson for kids. We share everything your first and second-grade student needs to know about urban, suburban and rural communities and areas.

- (2) **School Segregation: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver [15]:** Public schools are increasingly divided by race and class. John Oliver discusses the troubling trend toward school resegregation.
- (3) **The Rural/Urban Divide [16]:** There was a distinct difference between rural and urban America. The percentage of older Americans employed full- or part-time actually declined in the most urban, densely populated counties. In smaller rural counties, however, the number of older Americans in the workforce rose sharply.
- (4) **Six Charts that Illustrate the Divide between Rural and Urban America [17]:** Great divide between life in rural and urban America and factors that contribute to these differences are: poverty, new jobs, disabilities, entrepreneurships.
- (5) **Differences Between Rural and Urban Schools, Student Characteristics, and Student Aspirations in Ohio [18]:** The major purpose of this research was to describe the relationships between school location (urban vs. rural) and students' occupational and educational aspirations. A secondary purpose was to explore the relationships between student background factors and the location of the school.
- (6) **The Ten and a Half Myths that may Distort the urban Policies of Governments and International Agencies: Rural versus Urban Areas [19]:** Gives an idea about the characteristics of urban areas which generally distinguish them from rural areas in low and middle-income nations as well as how to engage and support urban students.

10. Conclusions

We have discussed diversity challenges in universities arising from urban-rural imbalance due to the underestimation of rural students' academic skills compared to their urban counterparts. Various strategies were proposed to overcome diversity challenges between urban and rural students in universities. Most importantly, a workshop project on diversity was suggested to be delivered to students at KAU in Rabigh for campus inclusion as well as improvement in interactions of student-to-student and student-to-faculty parties. Project learning outcomes involved that student and/or faculty would respect others' differences, avoid undermining skills of others, accept others, engage in campus and in-class activities, and communicate effectively. Reform actions towards undermining skills and learning abilities of rural students at KAU have been considered to ensure campus homogeneity. The two discussed successful models were great examples of overcoming rural/urban diversity-related problems. According to KAU standards and project budget, project procedures and their frequencies have been suggested with the involvement of all university parties to enhance campus diversity. Difficulties from different students/faculty backgrounds include gender bias, racial bias, and unconscious bias need to be recognized by university leaders. Increasing students/faculty awareness about rural/urban diversity is indispensable and should be tackled through exposing students and faculty to several recommended media/article resources similar to the ones proposed in this study.

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